

*Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* by Brent Nongbri (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 2013) ix + 275 pp.

Readers of *Modern Theology* will be unsurprised by Brent Nongbri's thesis that religion as a timeless and universal concept is a recent modern and European construction. The genealogical narrative of Religious Studies relates the rooting out of Christian bias to produce a scholarly account of religion (genus) and the religions (species); 'world religions' were mapped, and now the kaleidoscopic variety within and between religious traditions is discerned. Religious Studies thus firmly situates Christianity as one internally diverse religion among others. Where Christian theologians engage with adherents of other religious traditions, working within the parameters of 'religion and the religions' provides one theological option, as adopted in pluralist theology of religions. A contrasting approach is to pit theology against the modern concept, 'religion', while forging traditioned ways of hospitable engagement with people of other faiths. It is clear that these possibilities stand in no simple binary relation; rather, the current recognized urgency of interreligious peace-building and the priority given to interreligious hospitality owe much to the achievements of pluralist Christian theologies.

Nongbri's concerns, as a historian writing a history of 'religion', are different from the theological issues touched upon in the preceding paragraph. Yet even theologians who resolutely refuse to engage the modern concept religion will appreciate his project. Nongbri writes with admirable clarity, and with the historian's grasp of detail, to encapsulate both recent innovations in theorizing religion and the religions, and the persistence of unexamined assumptions that fail to grasp recent contextualization of religion as European and modern. Nongbri's concise account within a single volume is a valuable resource for research and teaching.

Nongbri's research specialism is the ancient Mediterranean world. His project is motivated by the widespread tendency within contemporary scholarship to project this modern concept backwards in time – despite the fact that religion 'is not a native category to ancient cultures' (7). He poses a challenge to 'a basic assumption' of the universality of religion made in 'most work in the humanities' (13), by constructing a diachronic narrative that pays attention to the specific, concrete, social and political contexts that shaped the 'philosophers, legal theorists, missionaries and others' who developed the concept religion (14).

There is a broad sweep to Nongbri's thesis, which advances through careful selection of 'representative episodes from a two-thousand-year-period' (13). The book is organised in seven chapters with introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 asks 'What Do We Mean by "Religion"?', concluding that in contemporary culture and scholarship there is a prevalent and persistent notion of religion as 'inner disposition and concern for salvation' (24). Religion is presumed to be distinct from politics and other secular areas of life, and universal within human cultures, with World Religions being seen as culturally specific examples. Chapter 2, 'Lost in Translation', contests translation as 'religion' of the Latin term *religio*, the Greek term *thrēskeia* and the Arabic term *dīn* – given that each term has distinctive

meanings, which are obscured by use of the modern concept. Thus: ‘Those aspects of life covered by these terms ...fall outside the idealized, private and interior realm associated with the modern concept of religion’ (45).

In the following two chapters, Nongbri unsettles a growing scholarly trend to interpret antiquity in terms of religion. Thus Chapter 3 takes issue with prominent arguments for the birth of religion in antiquity: Smith’s interpretation of “‘Judaizing’” during the Maccabean revolt (which for Nongbri refers to ethnic and civic customs); Beard’s reading of Cicero’s “‘enlightened’” approach to the gods as “‘Roman religion’” (for Nongbri, better seen as philosophical theology, prediction of the future, fate, and civil and ethnic identity); Boyarin’s claim that Eusebius presents Judaism, Hellenism and Christianity as religions (for Nongbri, Eusebius, within a biblical framework, located Jews and Greeks as heretical Christians); Lewis’s contention that Islam was conceived of by followers of Mohammed as a religion among religions from its inception (for Nongbri, Islam, too, saw Judaism and Christianity as heresies). Chapter 4 extends his contest in a discussion of how premodern groups managed difference without recourse to religion.

The next two chapters also work in tandem, this time to situate the emergence of religion over against the secular, with regard to: the fragmentation of Christendom; the related “‘rediscovery’” of antiquity, and the Renaissance detection of Christian wisdom – *prisca theologia* – in Greek philosophy; the “‘discovery’” of the “‘New World’” alongside a deepened engagement with the Orient. Chapter 5, ‘Renaissance, Reformation and Religion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, provides a valuable and concise analysis of the emergence of the modern concept, religion, over against the secular. The ground covered will be familiar to theological readers, notably through the work of Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’* (1996) and Gavin D’Costa *Christianity and World Religions* (2009). Chapter 6, ‘New Worlds, New Religions, World Religions’ charts contact between Christendom and ‘new peoples’ in the colonial period, with the displacing of heresiologies through the construction of world religions. Again, Nongbri’s useful synthetic account draws on scholarship that problematizes notions of newly discovered world religions as natural, and clarifies its implications.

Finally, in Chapter 7, ‘The Modern Origins of Ancient Religions’, Nongbri advances his original argument that the construction of ancient religions in terms of the modern concept religion has constituted a significant and largely unexamined mechanism for producing religion as natural and universal. In his conclusion, as scholar of antiquity, Nongbri offers the interesting observation that ‘Informed and strategic deployment of [the anachronism, religion,] ...can have unexpected and thought-provoking results’ (158). Where understood as a second-order redescriptive category, rather than as first-order descriptive, the terms gathered as ‘ancient religions’ may be disaggregated and rearranged in ways that better reflect ancient people’s own schema. It may well be that patristic Christian theologians already assist in this task.

Returning to the contemporary world, the impact of modern European notions of religion and the religions is far reaching. In theological perspective, Nongbri's insistence on the specifically Christian provenance of the modern European natural and universal category religion might be seen to underplay a point of theological significance: namely that this emergent generic category *cut loose from its Christian origins* under the conditions of European modernity. To be sure, Nongbri reconnects the category with its 'roots as a relic of Christian polemic' (12), protesting that separation is impossible. He writes: 'It is no secret that early practitioners of comparative religion held a number of Christian presuppositions, and in the present early-twenty-first-century atmosphere of religious pluralism, there are ongoing, commendable attempts to rid the category of religion of "Christian assumptions" in order to purify and democratize it' (11). At this point, traditioned theologians will detect the familiar Christianity-as-bias paradigm. Further, Nongbri argues that given its specifically Christian heritage, efforts to de-Christianize the category religion are 'to some extent futile' (12): the best possible outcome is that future use of the category will be more mindful of the genealogy he (and others) trace, so opening the possibility that new creative ways of using the category may emerge, ways that take full account of the Christian polemic embedded within.

However, from a theological perspective, there is a sense in which the generic category religion *is* successfully de-Christianized (and the treasured relics thus all too obscure). The religious/secular duality – that for all Nongbri's careful nuance he retains as his overall framework – obscures this point and its theological significance. If, instead, religion in European modernity is conceived of as a tripartite – Christianity diminished (secularism), Christianity transcended (religion cut loose in 'religion and the religions'), and Christianity increased (Christianity as ultimate destiny of all religions, the motor of modern mission during colonial expansion) – the Christianity transcended category allows the de-Christianization of religion to stand out more clearly. It is to be expected that some contaminating Christian relics will remain. Whereas the task of Religious Studies, with the historian Nongbri in this instance acting as spokesman, is to bring these irksome relics into view, the theologian may face a different problem.

However, for theologians who advocate theological use of Religious Studies methodologies, including the pluralist approach that places Christianity as one religion among others, working with religion as Christianity transcended is grasped as opportunity; there is no problem. But postcolonial and postmodern global cultural conditions allow for a fourth term to the modern tripartite, namely Christianity re-centred. Instead of embracing a de-Christianized generic concept, a traditioned Christian rationale is found for interreligious encounter. In both cases, Christian theology is subject to radical change. But traditioned interreligious encounter allows unforeseeable developments within re-centred received traditions, under the particular conditions of our globalized and postcolonial twenty-first century world. This is a different project to Nongbri's creative use of the category religion, despite the disruptive effects of abiding Christian relics; rather these relics are valued where they belong, in the continuing cultural development of re-centred traditions.

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